Imagination and the Violent Assault upon Virtue

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It is possible to imagine a purple cow, but only after one has some experience of "cows" and "purple."

WHEN ONE DARES to enter the country of other men's souls in quest of understanding about the nature of virtue, he enters a dangerous world, especially when that world is one fallen or falling to an extreme from its potential good order. It is the soul endangered to its extremity that most often attracts the poet; the philosopher is more likely to be concerned with the potential good. But whether poet or philosopher, what one may say of that foreign country is difficult to certify by either art or argument to any degree that commands unqualified assent. It becomes an almost foolhardy attempt if the explorer believes, as do I, that the country he sojourns is the Devil's promising satrapy. One suspects that the poet has an advantage over the philosopher in the country of the falling or fallen, through his imitations of the "possible or probable," in Aristotle's phrase. Drama is one thing, but how does one adequately explicate being's fall toward nothingness or its rescue to its potential. Willful evil and grace-touched good may be suggested by art's gesture, but how certified? The philosopher's good fortune may well be precisely this difficulty, depending upon whether humility is the more likely state of mind out of reason or out of the imagination. Certainly the soul's country is not only dangerous to explore but very tempting as well. And the poet so tempted may succumb to the siren song of the imagination, or more accurately, to the siren song of the imagination freed of its anchor—in reality, the insistent reason. James Joyce catches the poet's temptation with a range of beguilingly artful touches in his portrait of the young poet Stephen Dedalus. The boy Stephen admits to his reason that there can be no such thing as a green rose. But immediately he asserts that *somewhere* there must be a place of green roses.

I think young Stephen serves aptly to sum up a danger growing to dominance in the Western mind since the Renaissance: the elevation of mind to absolute authority through its substitution of the imagination for conscience. In the developing action, the imagination becomes liberated from reason and signals a new order of power over being. Little wonder that we should at last come to celebrate the imagination as the mind's special prerogative which makes man independent of all creation, of all being, but his mind itself. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that the alchemy practiced upon being by the emancipated imagination is restricted to poets. Philosophers and theologians and scientists and politicians and social workers—the gamut of "professional" minds within what is left of the polis—are as tempted to illusions as the poets. If Shelley insists that the poet is the unacknowledged legislator of mankind, it is not so much that he asserts a peculiar prerogative as that he makes a plea that the poet be included among all those others who, having appropriated the imagination as their own instrument, are busily remaking the world insofar as their power allows, leaving the poet outside.

Indeed, the imagination has sometimes become a substitute Lord and Giver of Life, not only for the poet but for a range of would-be makers of being; the imagination, liberated from its responsible grounding in reality, creates a variety of coloring books to tempt our happy greens. For instance, the statistician's vision of America abstracted from the latest census dots our mind. And

even the devoted, if sometimes frantic, pursuit of the causes of our diseases—medical research—participates in our general dislocation. Abstracted dots, limited and specialized research, leave us confused as to whether coffee is good for the heart but causes cancer of the pancreas or is good for fighting our inclination to cancer but is bad for the heart. It is with an increasing fear and trembling that we breathe and take in food, for in a world which increasingly understands, as the only possible falling away of being, that of physical death, we find ourselves more and more possessed by abstractions of life that make us fearful of it.

Such are the conditions about which Gabriel Marcel asks, "Does not the invasion of our life by techniques today [and techniques are the actions of abstraction implicit in our finiteness] tend to substitute satisfaction at a material level for spiritual joy, dissatisfaction at a material level for spiritual disquiet?" In *Man Against Mass Society,* he adds that our victory of technique over nature, having reduced the spirit of the conqueror himself, substitutes "generalized comfort, with its appurtenances." That substitution "seems the only possible way to make life tolerable, when life is no longer considered as a divine gift, but rather as a 'dirty joke'." The life we save, which is our own, must be saved by the imagination's pragmatic actions on nature through technique. We reach out and touch someone by wire; we have a coke and a smile; we have a calorie-free light beer. And suddenly we are besieged by new devils, in a new ideology, carcinogens. They are hidden in every "thing" we would touch. Without a vision that the mystery of life is larger than biological, we must find our priests in the robes of consumer advocates. Mind, having brought itself to believe itself the ultimate creator, develops a paranoia, threatened as it must be by any "thing" not mind; most especially, its own body becomes suspect and must be controlled at any expense. For as the perfume or diet-food ad is fond of saying for us, " 'I' am worth it."

Through such a shift in our vision of man in nature, then, mind is enabled to believe itself the ultimate cause and value of being. When that shift of perspective upon humankind becomes generally accepted, one need not be surprised to discover any number of attempts at restructuring existence by acts of the mind, attempts at what Voegelin calls by its true name: deconstructions of being. There is a spectrum of assaults upon the integrity of being, upon man and nature alike, as imagination is increasingly presumed the absolute power which may touch being at all points. The art of capitalistic advertising has in common with Marxist dialectical materialism precisely this faith in the imagination's power, once the imagination is freed of its responsibilities to being. (Coleridge fears precisely this license of the imagination to manipulate the world; he calls the imagination so liberated, *fancy.*) Now the spectacle of such dislocation must wear the aspect of materialism, whether we choose to speak of it from capitalist or Marxist positions. But we must be careful to notice that we are really engaged with a spiritual revolution, the relocation of spiritual ends in the self. That it is indeed a dislocated spiritualism with which we struggle is suggested by the terror associated with death, whether we concern ourselves with The Bomb or with cholesterol and carcinogens.

Now wherever two or three of us gather together in some endeavor, the temptation to restructure creation raises its serpent head. That temptation is itself not new, the theologian locating it as anciently as the Garden of Eden. What is new is our naive acceptance of such temptations as a legitimate and unlimited license with being, with the givenness of creation. No wonder then that the spectacle of our intellectual history since Milton is accompanied at every point by the systematic denial of Classical and Christian virtues; and when those denials are systematized, they become counter-habit; nor do we realize the particular intellectual sources, as we might if at least we were thoroughgoing Platonists. At the conclusion of his *General Theory,* John Maynard Keynes remarks that "Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some

academic scribbler of a few years back. I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas." (The same point now is being made by some economists about Keynes' own influence.) But more pervasive of our thought than defunct economists, since longer in the body of our thought, is the influence of seminal modernists, whose names we are not likely to recognize, let alone recognize the presence of their ideas in our own attitudes toward the world: the Abbé de Mably, who anticipates Rousseau; Joachim of Flora who anticipates Hegel. That is why I recommend at every opportunity examinations of those particles of past ideas suspended in our mind's address to the world and so distorting our vision: such works as Eric Voegelin's *Science, Politics & Gnosticism* and in his *From Enlightenment to Revolution;* as Gerhart Niemeyer's *From Nothingness to Paradise;* as Josef Pieper's *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* and his *In Tune with the World: A Theory of Festivity.*

Through such works—and there are many others, a contemporary phenomenon that suggests that ours is a Neo-Scholastic Age—one may come to see our spiritual and intellectual condition and recover hope, that virtue most difficult to maintain in our world. One might, for instance, discover that Auguste Comte's new science of sociology is but another specimen of that distortion of being of which Stephen Dedalus' pursuit of his place of green roses is another. Voltaire, Condorcet, Comte, Marx, Freud (the list is long) are artists restructuring existence through the power derived from gnosis, a power made pragmatic through Hegel's imagination. But Joyce's young hero, as we meet him in *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* is an apt dramatization of the process in Western thought since the Renaissance whereby the elevation of mind over being is achieved. Stephen is more generally known to us than some of the vague or familiar names I have summoned above, and so I concentrate on him.

Stephen, the gifted intellectual, defines the ultimate world as that made by the artist through his imagination. He expects, by the novel's end, to create such a world, having achieved a moment of self-apotheosis. His strategy is to be that of silence, exile, and cunning, the means whereby he will cast creation into an outer darkness of his own devising, having stripped it of whatever is useful to him for his projected world. In the old world's place will appear the world created by his own mind. And that new world's creator, by the act of creation itself, will have elevated himself beyond both worlds. Aloof from his own creation, indifferent to it, he will be left content, serenely "pruning his nails." Such creations may seem to account for all of reality—except that of the creator, the poet or social determinist himself. Did God wash his hands after creation? That seems to be a principal philosophical argument culminating in Nietzsche and celebrated by post-World War II theology, an argument that safely removes the propounder of the argument. Certainly it is a dimension of Joyce's ironic fiction. With the illusion of an innocence recovered by an act of the will, Stephen sets out, as he says, to "forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race." The vital necessity to man's being, conscience, was neglected by God but is not to be by this new god of being. Thus will Stephen show a thing or two to the God he struggles to deny.

We should notice that Stephen speaks (and Joyce himself on occasion speaks) with the exuberance of an anticipated conquest of being such as one finds already presumed accomplished, except for mopping up operations, in the several social and political programs for the mind's conquest of being that antedate the novel. For our own coloring book, we might draw a line from Descarte's vision of mind in reality, through the Enlightenment's modifications, through the French Revolution's committees, to Comte and his sociology and see that a figure of the modern mind does indeed emerge, whatever color we may use upon it. (Mine is rather darker than modernism's eternal greening of itself.) I but touch upon a ranging of mind, a raging of mind, in nature for the past two or three hundred years. The figure that emerges from our connected dots may begin to correspond interestingly to the image we try to conjure when we say *Washington, D. C.*

bureaucrat or *centralized government office,* or *totalitarian leader* with pejorative connotations to the terms—places and ideas and people we perceive devoted to their own green horses and green roses. (Note how upset our intellectual community was by Solzhenitsyn's drawing just such figures himself when he first came among us, in particular in his Harvard address.) For these several hundred years past, the new awakening is accompanied by an infectious optimism, advanced under the banner of Progress, a code term signaling the deconstruction of being through which a recovery of a new Eden at some far-off divine point in the future is promised through that higher reason which I have signalled as satanic. One no longer has the soul come trailing clouds of glory in the Platonic mode. And certainly, one seldom understands the soul as a special, discrete creation by God as is the orthodox view. Rather one by magical incantation of technique, of *process,* conjures clouds of glory about some collective point at the end of a variety of five-year plans.

It is well to be reminded again and again that, though we like to think ourselves advance agents of such progress, the strategy of gnostic manipulation of being is very ancient. Milton suggests the point: Satan's metamorphosis from being the brightest of angels to alienated gnostic—his fall from love through pride and envy and his emergence transformed into the jealous lord of all self-power—that subtle angelic transformation precedes time itself. What is new to our world, perhaps, is the confident elevation and celebration of gnosis as the absolute temporal and spatial power, with so little or so ineffective an opposition to the elevation, till it pervades the popular spirit. A third of Heaven's host fell with Satan, Milton's poem suggests. But as Gallup polls suggest of us, our percentages are higher. Consent to the manipulation is general as never before. We hear it filtered down to the lower regions of our social world from the intellectual patrons of modernism in Flannery O'Connor's Mrs. Lucynell Crater, in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." When Mr. Shiftlet piously reminds her that the monks of old slept in their coffins, she responds: "They wasn't as advanced as we are." The shift of power to the temporal dimension, under the auspices of the finite imagination, is rather modern. But fortunately, accompanying that shift is a lingering disquiet of a conscience only somewhat allayed, as packets of resistance suggest, ranging from Eric Voegelin to Fundamentalists. One may put it metaphorically by saying that the general shift to consent has been accomplished by the deliberate metamorphosis of Satan into Prometheus.

But the rebel against existence becomes heroic, not through a violent theft of Heaven's fire as with Prometheus, but by the very attempt to establish a *new* existence. Being is to be reconstituted by mind, and the gullible wait breathless with great expectations. Put another way, we have established a secular Manicheanism, one differing radically from the ancient heresy. In the old heresy, creation was seen as evil—a heresy fed in part by Platonism. Spirit was separated from nature in the interest of spirit's rescue from its enemy nature (Plato's shadow). The world became antagonist to the Heaven-bound soul, a distortion which has descended to us most conspicuously, it seems to me, in the Puritan mind. The Puritan mind actively contended with nature, expecting that by gaining control of being it could establish a City on the Hill, the City of God brought down to earth by man's labor. Light contended with dark, whether the "dark" was stubborn soil or wild savage. To the ancient heretic, *heaven* or *light* or *spirit* found its place in the transcendent. In our new version of the old heresy, the center of reference—the place of light, from which light emanates—is no longer beyond temporal and spatial illusions; it is, once more, the mind of man. The Puritan fathers operated on Manichean assumptions more thoroughly than they supposed, assumptions we inherited through Pragmatism's modifications of Puritanism. Today, from particle physics to astronomy, from the formulae of DNA and the mathematics of genes to the structure of nations into one nation, the order of being is largely presumed not only in the *keep* of human mind, as in the orthodox virtue of stewardship, but resting in the mind as cause—mind

as the determinant of order. Now when this assumed position is pressed firmly, its holder will deny the charge sometimes, not always. But from our actions in nature, that supposition of man's power as cause appears dominant of the actions. At the least we must conclude that the modern sense of responsibility to order is changed from what St. Augustine understood it to be when he defined virtue as "rightly ordered love." It has become *rightly ordered power,* the *rightly* justified by man's imagination.

From what I have so far argued, you will understand why I came to defend evil on one occasion. I called that lecture "Coals to Newcastle," its subtitle "A Defense of Evil before the Philadelphia Society in New Orleans." It was a teasing title on a subject deadly serious, an essay which yielded at last to the more sedate title, "Southern Letters in the Twentieth Century: The Articulation of a Traditor." Despite the shift of title, however, the piece remains a defense of evil to our skeptical world. What I have to say there is that evil exists and must be reckoned with, a recognition at the center of Southern literature in the first half of this century and beyond. If the Southerner tends to be more generally and firmly convinced of the existence of evil than others of his countrymen—present company perhaps excepted—it does not mean that he champions evil, though his actions and reactions may have an ambiguous cast to them, seen from prospects afar removed. The illustration I shall bring to the point is the portrait of that potentially good man, the Misfit, in Flannery O'Connor's story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find."

You will remember that the Misfit, in the resolution of that disturbing story, very firmly rejects the modern excuses for evil which our world so efficiently insists upon through psychological and social and environmental determinisms of various hues. Any one of these deterministic accountants, upon examination, reveals himself elevated above and independent of determinism in an innocent—that is, ignorant—oversight. (C. S. Lewis remarks that Freudianism is capable of explaining everything except Freud.) The Misfit very firmly rejects the old grandmother's unconvincing excuses for his violence; he clings to his evil as some sign of his particular—his personal—existence. For the world in which he finds himself has systematically denied him everything else. It attempts most particularly to deny him his own willfulness. But the Misfit is still acutely aware, as the grandmother comes only slowly to see, that willful evil threw all creation off balance, a teaching as old as Genesis. Willful Good, the New Testament teaches, comes shockingly into creation to right the balance, indeed to overcome and outweigh evil. The Misfit recognizes that this struggle toward a balance in being is the most fundamental struggle of all; because he engages the spiritual issue, he threatens to become the story's hero. His struggle is at levels deeper than the mind's reason alone can account for; for the mystery of good and of evil is beyond the rational intellect's unaided power. As the Misfit puts the matter:

> [Jesus] thrown everything off balance. If He did what he said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if he didn't then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him.

We encounter all too often the spectacular violence to being of such escapades as the Misfit's murder of an anonymous family encountered at random on a Georgia backroad. Our daily press is full of such incidents. Its corollary, however, Miss O'Connor expects us to come to through reflection. For there has already occurred a violence against being in the gnostic manipulations of the Misfit's personhood, a subtle violation he himself recognizes but cannot contend with intellectually. The violation drives him to rage in a just cause beyond his understanding and so beyond the just limits of rage. He senses that the assumptions about him in the society that tries to deal with him is that he is an accident of random force. We do not solve social problems but rather create social monsters when man is treated first as an accident and then the particular man is

denied his participation in his own being on the grounds that he is only an unfortunate accident of nature. It takes no doctor of logic to conclude that if man is such a random being, it can be only a random force that man himself uses upon his fellows, even if the user is dignified by degree as a sociologist or psychiatrist. If the determinist's premise is correct, then social or psychic manipulations may establish only a random order. Thus determinism entangles mind hopelessly in contradiction.

For Miss O'Connor—and for others of us Misfits—there is a more deadly violence than the Misfit's practiced in the name of social progress out of the deterministic premises. Finally, the irrational actions practiced upon our Misfits are more destructive than the Misfit's own random violences. Through the insidious violence to spirit used by the gnostic, one's personhood is reduced to *individual* and thence to a *unit* of energy in an amalgam from which the world is to be restructured to suit some private or semi-private dream of progress. The Misfit's very mannerly, and at last very personal, slaughter of the grandmother is a violence of another order. Now if we cannot see this distinction as at least a possible position to hold, it is because we have been so thoroughly dislocated from a traditional understanding of man's essential nature. That traditional understanding acknowledges a Cause of all existence separate from the willful human mind. Any perceptive teacher encounters the dislocation in most of his students. The most apt illustration comes for me whenever I teach Dante's *Inferno*. For it is not an easy point to make clear to the modern mind that, for Dante, sin destroys the sinner; that for Dante this point is the most central and deadly concern of all. In a world which has lost its vision of transcendence, it is a puzzling idea indeed that the murderer is of more central concern than his victim. But even Socrates insisted that an evil action cannot harm a good man, in which belief he accepted the evil action of his death sentence unperturbed. That is the central tenet of orthodox Christianity as well, without which Christianity becomes merely a mode of social science.

The Dantean point should not be so difficult to entertain, given our world. A major philosophical question increasingly dominates our domestic political concerns. Restively, the popular spirit objects that our social directors consider the criminal more important to society than his victims. Against a seemingly pervasive defense of the criminal in the judicial system—a defense whose principal source is the academic world with its array of vested social interests—there has risen an opposition to the determinist principle and a growing demand that the victim of crime be rescued from injustice. To say that the killer is no more guilty of his crime than his knife is to say an arrestingly witty thing; to adumbrate that wit through social science and political activism has led to the creation of extensive infrastructures in the universities and to vast armies of social agents. For a long time, common sense was baffled and intimidated by such assaults, though it at last begins to reassert itself after exile. There is, for instance, a growing demand for capital punishment and for prison sentences beyond the annulment of parole boards. But there is in this new stirring an ironic complication sufficient to any good dramatist: the defenders of the victims of crime tend to be, if we notice carefully, those for whom the vision of transcendence is not entirely lost. It is they who must resolutely demand the death penalty. On the other hand, the opponents of the death penalty—not invariably so, but often enough to make a conspicuous difference—are those who have lost their orientation of mind in the transcendent. They tend to champion a secular virtue out of deterministic faith; they call it *rehabilitation*. They would restructure the anti-social citizen like the Misfit into a "useful" member of society—through manipulation of the environment or the Misfit or both. Teach the criminal a skill and find him a job in society and he will recognize the virtue of usefulness to society.

A reminder is here in order, given our emotionally confused intellectual arena. Just as one feels compelled to point out that in opposing unilateral disarmament one is not thereby championing nuclear war, so one must remind the thoughtless that in opposing

unilateral disarmament of the community against willfully violent men one is not therefore endorsing willful violence. Nor am I saying that each of us does not bear a responsibility as a person and as a citizen and, above all, as a Christian (if that be our profession) to the possible rescue of the fallen. The distinction I insist we must make is in the principles out of which such rescue must be attempted. If we do so, we are prepared to see that the grandmother's gesture in Miss O'Connor's story is perhaps a greater act of rescue than all of the work of social agencies that have in part driven the Misfit toward his random violence. If one does not admit the possibility of willful evil in his premises, his attempted rescue of the evil-doer is most probably going to take the form of a manipulation of being that exacerbates the problem. Against such manipulations, we may expect a proliferation of Misfits, a prophecy which we need only test in the daily press.

Those words are barely said when an instance of what I mean seizes and agitates the public mind, the trial of John Hinckley, Jr. for attempted assassination. And as an instance of a Misfit, he is particularly useful even as he is particularly confusing to the public mind, stirring up fundamental questions. For Hinckley is not poor, not disadvantaged in any of the ways that code word signifies. Neither is his victim a ghetto citizen, now or by origin. The easy social and environmental explanations such as the ones Flannary O'Connor's grandmother attempts to apply to the Misfit have more tenuous ground with Hinckley than with the Misfit. Both Hinckley and President Reagan are suddenly juxtaposed in national attention through a violent confrontation; age aside, we discover them of similar economic and social origins and present estate. But each represents a different centering of spiritual hungers—the one upon the self as self-justified, the other upon a service (a stewardship) of transcendent obligations. The immediate effects are not here at issue, only the spiritual ground each occupies: Hinckley fails, being a poor shot; the President may fail, being a poor economist perhaps. But the source of the actions and not the fulfillment of intention is our concern here.

What the general public discovers through the celebrated case, as reflected by its surrogates, the jury, is that we have no clear understanding of the spiritual origins of action, even as we have no adequate legal instrument with which to engage the issue in the name of justice. The reports of the jury's deliberations and of statements made by individual members during and after those deliberations make of it a microcosm of the public mind, however embarrassing that admission. We see the jurors reacting to questions about the reality of event, and they are very much circumscribed in answering those questions by the pseudo-science of psychiatry. The jury, attempting to use common sense to reconcile evidence and argument to the limits imposed by law, presents itself to us in angry confusion. The law in its origin is largely the very pseudo-science that in turn is summoned to clarify action and motive. The jury is helpless. For Hinckley must be declared innocent by reason of insanity if "as a result of mental disease or defect," he either "lacked substantial capacity to conform his conduct to the requirements of the law or lacked substantial capacity to appreciate the wrongfulness of his conduct." For one juror, "It just seemed like he was a sick white boy looking for someone to love him." Thus the attempted assassination was an expression of love for Jodie Foster.[1] To another he is clearly insane because "Nobody, no matter how much money he has, would spend it like that. He pays a jet fare and stays a day." Another counters that, "If he was responsible enough to come all the way to Washington, check into a hotel and pull the trigger several times, he was sane."

Hinckley, we note, is a poet too, and some of his poetry becomes crucial evidence. Is poetry fiction or not? That metaphysical question, on which Aristotle has helpful things to say, may be answered perhaps by reference to the dictionary, a latitude the judge denies. Still, one of the poets on the jury, countering the charge that the poetry shows him insane, responds, "This man is a writer and writers are strange. He is not stranger than they are because he was infatuated with Jodie Foster. He shot four people."

How fallen we are, from Dante and Beatrice to John Hinckley and Jodie Foster. "We did the best job with what we had to work with," the 22-year-old jury foreman said after the unanimous decision that Hinckley was innocent by reason of insanity. And surely that is a conclusion we must come to, examining the evidence. The poet Hinckley is now remanded to St. Elizabeth's Hospital, where some time ago the poet Ezra Pound was held. Pound's retention was not, however, on the grounds *Time* magazine states of him: "The most prominent American to plead insanity was Poet Ezra Pound, who did so to avoid going on trial for 19 counts of treason for his pro-Fascist radio broadcasts from Italy during World War II." On the contrary, Pound struggled to be tried, insisting that a trial would justify him. Ironically, psychiatrists for the prosecution attempted to prove his insanity by the evidence of his poetry, finding in his celebrated work evidence of derangement in the technique that alone supports many academicians in our day.[2]

In the trial of Pound there is dramatic potential, but even more so in the trial of Hinckley. The implications of the spiritual malaise affecting our whole culture are heightened by the obvious limits of the agent and his antagonists, implications that Euripides could turn to an effective, disturbing, devastating account, though such a new tragedian might also find himself in exile from the public anger he might arouse. It is much safer to dramatize older witch-trials. Lacking such a poet, we at least move toward some minor accommodation to the disturbing disorientation of justice that has evolved. We seem near to declaring that one may be both insane and guilty, in which acknowledgment we will have taken a giant step toward the spiritual grounds of our actions. It is a ground still defended, as we were saying, by a remnant, usually designated the advocates of law and order.

Though law-and-order advocate is a term we shall employ, given its popular currency, we might first see it in relation to an argument we urged earlier. The newly proposed national law, a direct consequence of the Hinckley trial, that says a defendant may be both insane and guilty is a considerable modification of both the transcendental Platonism we have discussed and its secularized image, mechanistic Platonism. To declare a person who commits a criminal act not culpable by reason of insanity is to indict a failure of reason in the perpetrator (as we have come to call him evasively) for which he himself is not responsible. To declare the culprit guilty, however, implies that he possesses adequate reason. He knows right from wrong, but has willfully chosen to do the wrong. The transcendental Platonist's position must find the failure, not in the will, but in the incompleteness of knowledge, and the remedy must be a perfection of knowledge through reason. The secular Platonist, whose position we may describe as mechanistic Platonism since it rejects transcendent grounds, also finds the failure elsewhere than the will. It sees the difficulty in the human mechanism as mechanism—as machine—and its remedy is to modify the machine through psychology's technology; that is, through psychiatric readjustment of the machine. To say that one may be both insane and guilty, then, is to acknowledge two conditions of being in one contingency of act. To do so allows a conclusion that either may be the initiating source of the evil act, or that they are separate and to be treated separately. But the new position has nevertheless recovered for us a complexity of being which is rejected by both the transcendental Platonist and the mechanistic Platonist. (Both species of Platonists are "idealists," are they not?) I wish it were unnecessary to say that in my argument I do not mean to deny or unduly deprecate either the advantage to the individual of a fullness of knowledge pursued to the extent of his gifts, or that there are certain advantages to a person's being which psychiatric technology may provide. The point is rather that neither faith, transcendental or mechanistic Platonism, is in itself sufficient to deal with the complexity of our being, though both incline toward an absolutist position which assumes itself sufficient. It is also necessary to say that in our century, the one (mechanistic Platonism) has gained such a consent to authority that it takes a spectacle like the Hinckley trial to call it in question.

We have introduced a concern for the difference between two extreme understandings about the criminal and his victim, and to this concern we return. In doing so, we discover that the two understandings of the criminal and his victim reflect very contrary understandings about the role of justice in the world. We may put the two positions at the extreme of their implications about man in the world.

On the one hand is the law-and-order advocate, who is more likely to believe in the immortality of the soul than his adversary. He is a popular figure for the editorial cartoonist. His adversary, on the other hand, sees mankind in general and the criminal in particular as victim of environment or circumstance or even genes; if the adversary is depicted at all by the cartoonist (except perhaps in the *National Review*), he will appear as reasonable, intelligent, and learned in the ways of the world. If not that image, then by a borrowing from the ground belonging properly to his enemy (the law-and-order advocate), he will be shown deeply compassionate, his face that of love beyond understanding. The term *law-and-order advocate* has been made a pejorative one by his adversary, a circumstance that would baffle a Socrates or St. Augustine or St. Thomas or Dante suddenly come among us. On the other hand, his adversary, the mechanistic Platonist whose other names may be rehabilitationist or social reformer, is at best doubtful that the soul exists, which means that the significance of life for him must rest in a materialistic ground, a ground which centers upon biological existence. For the one (the law-and-order advocate), capital punishment is not seen as the end of justice but the beginning; damnation through willful evil is the burden the soul may be required to bear for its willfulness, even as a rescue from such an exile from being (damnation) is possible through confession, contrition, and amendment under the auspices of grace. Not, of course, that all law-and-order advocates so believe. I know one who bases his argument entirely on the general safety, his most telling argument being that there is no known record of an executed murdered who subsequently commits another murder. But our concern is with the spiritual dimension of the question, a more crucial concern among the law-and-order advocates than allowed by the popular portraits of them in the media. The soul is at issue in such a concern, which consideration can but baffle one who does not believe man possessed of a soul.

My students are equally baffled, being children of modernism, to find Dante's position exactly that of the law-and-order advocate. In their confusion about man as spiritual being, they are even more shocked, however, to find some of those souls guilty of violent crimes located on Dante's Purgatory Mountain rather than in his Hell. It seems an inconsistency to them (a point quite beside whether they believe in capital punishment, as most do not, parroting popular sentiments on the subject). How can it be that some murderers are bound for Heaven and others are eternally confined to Hell? Of course what they suspect is an arbitrariness in Dante. They are, however, more sympathetic (being young) to those souls guilty of excessive love—lust, gluttony, avarice—whom we find in the *Purgatorio* just short of the Garden of Eden. (What they have yet to learn is the limit of analogy; expecting to sigh oneself into a state of ecstasy—"tender is the night"—is to confuse ecstasy with hyperventilation.) The difference in attitude between my students and Dante, the difficulty of our world's reconciling feeling to reality in these high questions, is an indication of how far we have come in establishing sentimentality as the mode of popular thought. For the rehabilitationist? Well, for that mind, the life to be saved is the biological or social integer, and sentimentality is a welcomed climate of mind within which to manipulate mind. It feeds those frequent orgies of common social guilt advanced by deterministic arguments, in a culture where euthanasia is reserved to fetuses but denied even the most brutal criminal.

Now rationally one has many questions to bring to bear upon such a complex argument as this over capital punishment. Again, I don't mean to suggest that I think it is a simple problem. In opening the complexity, one might start, for instance, with the puzzle of Socrates' deliberate refusal in the *Crito* to

allow his friends to bribe the jailor so that he might escape into exile. If his own death is unjust, he argues, a greater injustice is done by traducing the law of the state upon which the general well-being of the *polis* depends. Therefore he will stay and take his medicine, which for him can only mean a restored health of soul through curing it of the disease of body. Socrates' position in the matter makes interesting juxtaposition to Thoreau's argument about civil disobedience. Or one might very profitably reflect on the questions that arise when we set beside Socrates and Thoreau the position Ezra Pound affirms in *Canto* XIII, where he presents the Confucian position. Kung's disciples ask him, "If a man commit murder/should his father protect him, and hide him?" To which Kung replies, "He should hide him." For to protect him would require a violence against the order of the state. There is a world of difference between Pound's answer to the question posed and the one St. Augustine gives: ". . . it is one thing to tell a lie, another to pass the truth over is silence. If . . . we would avoid exposing a man to the risk of death, we must be prepared to conceal the truth but not to tell an untruth. We must neither expose him or lie, otherwise we shall kill our own soul for the sake of another man's body." (The passage occurs in St. Augustine's Commentary on Psalms 5 and 7.) The difference has to do with man believed immortal, his soul at issue for St. Augustine—at issue through the dangers of his willfulness—and man considered as a temporal creature by Pound.

On this question of capital punishment, there lies the distance of a whole world between the law-and-order advocate who is fundamental about man's nature and the secular intellectual who supposes himself liberated from any bonds in the transcendent. The confused rhetorical position of the one, who is most likely labeled Fundamentalist as a strategy of repudiation, and the dialectically logical position of the other, tend to make the dialectician's seem the valid position. But that can be an illusion accomplished only by the subtle exile of argument by the trained mind, an accomplishment of the new gnosis in its deliberate strategy of dislocating the popular mind from its tradition; thus the popular mind is left with the residual language of rhetoric which it uses poorly. (As a corollary illustration of the point, see Milosz's *Captive Mind.*) I'm using the term *rhetoric* here in the medieval sense, recalling that in the teaching of virtue by the schools, there was of old a very careful hierarchy which moved from grammar to logical use of grammar to rhetorical use of logic and grammar; our traditionalists have often lost their grammar and logic, which leaves their arguments often vulnerable in the intellectual arena. But there is a distinction to be made here and always remembered: the truth of a position and the argument for that position are not always the same. (In recovering these terms, grammar, logic, rhetoric, one finds Dorothy Sayers' essay, "The Tools of Learning," most welcome.)

The distinction I've suggested between the traditionalist mind and the modernist gnostic mind is certainly one Flannery O'Connor knows and uses in building the enveloping world of her fiction. She uses it, for instance, in her pursuit of the theme of goodness with her Misfit. And that is why he is a disturbing presence in her story, a presence the modernist mind has difficulty in dealing with, even as it disturbs that mind. We tend to side with the Misfit, though we feel uncomfortable in doing so. We are so irritated by the anonymous family by the time he comes upon the scene that we are almost prepared ourselves to pull the trigger. Those children in particular deserve at least a good thrashing beyond what most school boards or child care agencies would permit. But is it the Misfit's bloody violence that disturbs us at last? Or does the violence disturb because it is excessive of the force we think might be used to order the family's being, to exact discipline? Rather, what is confusing, I suspect, is his calm, orderly rejection of those modernist clichés about the nature of evil that have become our new tradition, clichés which we have taken to heart, believing we have taken them to mind. After all, there are bounteous studies, many of them statistical no less, to support the clichés—or so it is said. The Misfit's refutation of modernist clichés

comes before his violent act and stirs in us recollections of a just cause violated, not by the Misfit, but by our own society. In the Misfit's deportment it is almost as if some minor dignity remains to him through his oppositions, and at last even through his acts of violence, a dignity which perhaps a Jean-Paul Sartre seizes upon and raises to new moral imperative. But our speculation as to why we are so disturbed by the Misfit suddenly enlarges our question: what seems most disturbing of all in the Misfit's presence is not so much his opposition to those modernist excuses for evil which even a Sartre is capable of accepting (as Sartre's flirtations with Stalinist social order indicates). The Misfit unsettles us by attempting to stand in opposition to good itself. In choosing his opposition, he pays tribute to the existence of good in a sense we have—in our modernist aberrations— attempted to deny. It is as if he reserves the sin of hate from its transformation to love of power. He shifts the ground of the question. For the Misfit at least knows where the real question lies and so he is in a country beyond that of our secular gnosticism. His agony is an agony of soul—not a puzzle of mind to be solved by gnosis. With considerable discomfort to us, we have been drawn into a world—strange, but strangely real.

The Misfit's risk is one to his being, a deliberate risk that sets him quite apart from the secular world that seems to have him so firmly in its grasp. That world seems to have explained him almost out of existence, but not quite. A touch out of that secular world, a reaching beyond that world, occurs as the denouement. It is a movement by the grandmother into the country the Misfit occupies, as he surely understands. The grandmother at last declares, "Why, you're one of my children" and touches him, whereupon he leaps back "as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest." One appreciating Miss O'Connor's metaphysical wit will perhaps discover in her language a playfulness through which she approaches serious depths: to the soul lost almost beyond recovery, the gesture of rescue is a terrifying threat. Our old metaphor for Satan, the serpent, can be turned inside out with a rather startling recognition: from Satan's position, Christ is the serpent, the invader of the garden of the mind as its own place, and this is a point that recurs in Miss O'Connor's fiction. The Misfit flinches from a gesture of love, a gesture the grandmother cannot resist. It is a gesture in sharp contrast to her pretenses of concern for the Misfit up to this point through which she has attempted only to save her own life. Now losing it, she has in Miss O'Connor's vision, rather gained life. And in an essay, Miss O'Connor says a very interesting thing about the Misfit himself:

> . . . however unlikely this may seem, the old lady's gesture, like the mustard-seed, will grow to be a great crow-filled tree in the Misfit's heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become. But that's another story.

It is a story which is concerned very much with rehabilitation, but at a level beyond the secular dimension of that term. If one is interested in that other story, it is called *The Violent Bear It Away*, the *it* of that title being "the Kingdom of Heaven." Let us conclude here, however, by a reiteration: in her story, one has a stirring of the soul to agony, a concern far beyond the spectacle of violence in the story, as Dante would easily understand. The soul at issue is, first of all, the grandmother's, who in the context of the fiction seems rescued beyond death through her compassionate gesture that precipitates her worldly death. It is a gesture which has to do with spiritual—not social—rehabilitation. That is, it has to do with a movement of love, her own most immediately, but within the conditions of the grace of love. As she moves, she is moved. (One cannot separate the movements, lest one be forced to say on the one hand that the grandmother is determined by grace or on the other that her action precipitates grace. The action of grace in relation to the actions of will is a mystery beyond the reach of purely rational explication, being in the province of our faith in mystery.) That is why you will find Miss O'Connor, in speaking of this story, remarking that it is an intrusion of grace through the old lady's gesture that resolves the fictional

tension Miss O'Connor has built from the opening sentences. The Misfit is right about the old woman and her problem with virtue: "She would of been a good woman," he says, "if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life." That is a judgment appropriate no doubt to most of us, since most of us need shocking out of our private pastures where we sport with our various green horses. Conscience has been largely exorcised from man by modern gnosticism, through enticing illusions foisted by liberated imagination. Perhaps we shall have an increasing need of Misfits. At least that way an occasional grandmother or grandfather may be rescued, may be forced toward recovering abandoned virtues, forced toward a "rightly ordered love."

[1]As if to illustrate our concern that the imagination, liberated from its proper grounding in reality, leads to intolerable dream worlds, Hinckley has a long letter delivered to The *New York Times* (July 8, 1982); among his assertions: "My actions of March 30, 1981, the attempted assassination have given special meaning to my life and no amount of imprisonment or hospitalization can tarnish my historical deed. . . . The shooting outside the Washington Hilton was the greatest love offering in the history of the world. . . . At one time Miss Foster was a star and I was the insignificant fan. . . . Now everything is changed. I am Napoleon and she is Josephine. I am Romeo and she is Juliet. I am John Hinckley, Jr. and she is Jodie Foster." Before we conclude too quickly that such ravings are proof of madness, we should first see the movie or romantic history based on the life of Hinckley, both of which are "in press" or "in production" no doubt.

[2]One may have some measure of how far either poetry or its audience have fallen if we recall Sophocles in his old age. The story is that Sophocles, nearly ninety, was hauled into court to be declared mentally incompetent so that the son could take over his estate. Sophocles read a chorus from *Oedipus at Colonus*, which he had just written. The judges threw the case out of court on the evidence of the poetry.